

## What to Follow “Make” and What to Follow “Do”

### ---Corpus-based Study on the De-lexical Use of “make” and “do” in Native Speakers’ and Chinese Students’ Writing

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**Abstract:** To many Chinese students, learning the words such as “make” and “do” seems a piece of cake, yet learning how to use them appropriately is another case. This paper aims to investigate Chinese learners’ use of the verbs “make” and “do”, two major representatives of high-frequency words from the perspective of de-lexical uses by comparing authentic learner data with native speaker data using computerized corpora, thus to shed some light on vocabulary learning and teaching in China.

**Key words:** high-frequency word; de-lexical use; make; do; corpora

#### 1. Introduction & Aim

To many Chinese students, learning the words such as “make” and “do” seems a piece of cake, yet learning how to use them appropriately is another case. This paper aims to investigate Chinese learners’ uses of the verbs “make” and “do”, two major representatives of high-frequency words, particularly focusing on the de-lexical uses, i.e., they are used with nouns as their objects to indicate simply that someone performs an action, not that someone affects or creates something. These verbs have very little meaning when they are used in this way (Collin Cobuild Grammar, 1990: 147 cited from Bengt Allenberg et al 2001: 174).

De-lexical use of the high frequency verbs is in focus because in English this type of words accounts for a sizeable proportion, especially of the high frequency words. They do not have a fixed content lexical meaning in themselves. Instead, they usually co-occur with companies to indicate some actions. Sinclair and Renorf (1988 cited from Yang) argue that one typical feature of English is the wide uses of de-lexical words. But unfortunately, in English teaching and learning, de-lexical words have not received sufficient attention of teachers and students, as they seem easy to remember and use (simple form, easy to find an equivalent in native tongue). Yet, the results usually turn out to the contrary. So that is what this paper is for.

The main questions are: *Do* Chinese learners tend to over or underuse these verbs? How do they tend to use these de-lexical verbs? To answer these questions, authentic learner data has been compared with native speaker data using computerized corpora.

#### 2. Data, Methodology and Procedures

The computer learner corpora used for the study are the Chinese Learner English Corpus(CLEC), with 412 , 529 words, which contains essays written by Chinese college students, MSSW (middle school students’ writing corpus) and MSTM (textbooks for middle school students in China (RJ)) with 20,198 words. To compare the

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Chinese students’ use with native English, it is necessary to have at least a native speaker control corpus. For this purpose, I use BROWNTAG with 2,373,186 words and a 182,967 word sample from the Louvain Corpus of Native English Essays (LOCNESS) which contains argumentative essays written by native-speaker American students and is therefore fully comparable to the learner corpus.

As a first step in the study, this paper computes the frequencies in the five corpora and the overall frequencies of “make” and “do” is listed *down* in decreasing order of frequency with the top 30 collocates for reference in table 1.1 and table 1.2 in the appendix..

In step two, the main collocates of de-lexical use of “make” and “do” are picked out from CLEC, MSSE and MSTM. Details are listed in table 2.1 in the appendix.

The comparative data from BROWN and LONNESS are offered in table 2.2 in the appendix.

### 3. Analysis and Findings

While the stage in the analysis of table 1 yields some interesting quantitative results, a qualitative approach is necessary to explain them.

Considering the absolute frequencies of the different uses in the above corpora, striking differences are revealed: Chinese students’ use of “make” and “do” are hugely more frequent than that of native speakers, yet not variously. Larger proportions are recurrent uses according to some statistics as follows:

<i>Make</i> use of (occur 234 times)	<i>Make</i> progress (occur 102 times)	<i>Make</i> friends (occur 73 times)
<i>Make</i> a living occur 41 times)	<i>Do</i> homework (occur 58 times)	<i>Do</i> thing(s) (occur 120 times)
<i>Do</i> exercises (occur 56 times)	<i>Do</i> something (occur 55 times)	...

On the first look, it seems that Chinese students widely overuse these two verbs, but with a deeper observation, we may find that they under-use the high frequency verbs in some aspects (i.e. the variety). Middle school students’ uses and expression are rather limited and narrow, due to their proficiency level, as well as their knowledge horizon. Their expressions are relatively the simulation of the textbooks, which reflecting the insufficiency of contextual input for the students. They avoid using it in other unfamiliar situation in case of making mistakes. In the EFL procedures, it is a common phenomenon. Learners consciously or subconsciously avoid using the words or expressions that they are unfamiliar with or not sure of the usage in order to avoid making mistakes. In other words, they are apt to use those words again and again which they are familiar or they are sure the safe use of them, thus resulting in overusing or misusing them. Comparing with the middle school students, college students seem to have learned more collocations; still, many a awkward expressions occur in their writing.

On the basis of the data in table 2, we will concentrate on one of the most frequent categories---de-lexical use of “make” and “do”---which display striking differences across the corpora.

On the comparison of the nouns follow “make” and “do” from the native corpus , we may easily discover that most of the nouns follow “make” are relatively “big” positive words, referring to some rather important actions, such as “decision”, “judgment”, “research”, “law” , etc. Only a small proportion are concrete neutral words, i.e. cake, soap, lid, etc. On the other hand, a major proportion of the nouns follow “do” are rather negative: “disadvantage”, “harm”, “damage”, “penance”, “trick”, etc. If we observe a little further, we may find that even the modifiers before the nouns are negative, for instance, “dirty work”, “dubious things”, “uninteresting routines”, etc. From the list above, we can also find that like “make”, “do” can be followed by some concrete neutral nouns,

too. Fantastically, these neutral nouns have some features different from those after “make”. For example, many of the nouns follow “do” are –ing form: running, shopping, training, lawmaking, etc. “Do” is rarely followed by nouns with –tion form, which occur more often after “make”. In addition, it can be followed by some nouns related to physical exercise or sports such as “running”, “headstand”, “kick-up”, etc.

On studying the nouns occur after “make” and “do” in CLEC and MSSW, the nouns occur after “make” and “do” in Chinese students’ writing are not so alike to those occur in native speakers’ writing. What’s more, some never occur in native corpora. Instead, their styles are rather similar to those occur in MSTM.

We shall have to admit that even the so fairly advanced students haven’t totally mastered the de-lexical uses of these high-frequency verbs, though they look rather simple. They seem to have remembered the structure “*make* something.”, “*do* something..” well, but they are not clear what kind of nouns should follow “make” and what should follow “do”. The following are some samples cited from CLEC and MSSW.

- |                                       |  |                                    |
|---------------------------------------|--|------------------------------------|
| 1... <i>do</i> all things of movement | 2... decided to <i>do</i> camping                            | 3... <i>do</i> a doctor/ singer... |
| 4 ... <i>do</i> enough example...     | 5....will <i>do</i> some progress...                         | 6...can <i>do</i> home teaching... |
| 7.... <i>do</i> wrong behavior        | 8.... <i>make</i> a lot of exercise, you will <i>do</i> well | 9... <i>make</i> a normal match    |
| 10... <i>make</i> waste of water      | 11... <i>make</i> a lot of ways...                           | 12... <i>make</i> a play...        |
| 13... <i>make</i> a purpose           | 14... <i>make</i> a failure                                  | 15... <i>make</i> a good diet      |

It is now possible to conclude the answers to the questions raised at the beginning of the paper. Results show that EFL learners, even at an advanced proficiency level, have great difficulty with a high-frequency verb such as *make* or *do*. De-lexical uses prove to be particularly treacherous to them. Although “make” and “do” are two most common high frequency verbs, they are unnecessarily an easy piece for the Chinese students to use them appropriately. Firstly, because of the influence of the mother tongue, as both *make* and *do* share the same Chinese equivalent “做...”, Chinese students tend to merely translate the Chinese equivalents into English, thus resulting the awkward expressions as mentioned above. Further more, they are apt to use them with their intuition and regard them as correct. Taking a look at the learners’ uses of “do” and the collocation occur in MSTM as an example, you will easily find that to a certain extent, students’ writing have been affected by the materials from the textbooks. Because of the limitations of textbooks, it is necessary to offer EFL learners the access to more materials written or spoken by native speakers. And native corpora can help us reach our goal.

#### 4. Implication

The implication is discussed with the hope of throwing light on vocabulary learning and teaching. These results have interesting pedagogical implication because although high-frequency verbs are encountered very early in instructional programs ( e.g. *make* & *do* ), once they have been taught, they tend to be neglected. Learners are at a risk of having only a very crude knowledge of their grammatical and lexical patterning and being apt to use them widely with their own intuition and regard them as true. The intention is to draw attention to cross linguistic differences in the complex relationship between verbs’ meaning and syntax (Bengt Altenberg et al: 190). In China, as the teaching materials fail to provide adequate input in this area, therefore, it is highly recommended that concordance---based exercises extracted from native corpora are a useful resource for raising learners’ awareness of the structural and collocation complexity of high-frequency verbs.

**References:**

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**Appendix:**

**Table 1.1 Top 30 Collocates of Make in Decreasing Order of Frequency (3 Rights)**

Frequencies	BROWNTAG	LONCNESS	CLEC	MSSW	MSTM(RJ)
Tokens(percentage)	1/1431	1/338	1/384	1/141	1/281
1	The 151	The 42	The 214	The 141	A 384
2	A 149	A 39	A 192	A 112	The 239
3	It 82	Of 18	Of 187	Of 66	Of 209
4	Of 60	More 16	Use 138	Me 81	To 90
5	To 41	It 16	It 96	Us 69	In 86
6	For 36	And 15	Good 84	Our 57	Up 84
7	Sure 31	That 15	More 84	Progress 57	Sure 82
8	And 30	For 13	Progress 78	You 55	it 73
9	That 30	Aware 12	In 73	School 49	List 69
10	In 30	Decision 12	And 68	In 49	You 62
11	An 30	Their 11	Us 66	More 48	And 60
12	Then 30	Any 9	People 63	And 45	Sentence 58
13	Any 22	To 8	Them 63	My 38	For 52
14	Him 21	Them 8	Me 62	Up 32	With 51
15	his 21	His 8	Our 58	For 30	Notes 47
16	Up 19	This 8	For 58	Very 30	Your 39
17	This 17	An 7	To 57	Friends 29	It 24
18	You 17	Him 7	Perfect 55	With 29	As 27
19	No 17	People 6	Waste 48	To 28	Feel 26
20	He 16	Decisions 7	Full 47	Happy 28	About 26
21	With 14	Better 6	Water 45	Plan 27	More 26
22	More 14	They 6	Their 42	People 24	Dialogue 24
23	some 12	Up 5	Some 39	Disappoint 23	Good 23
24	Your 12	Choice 5	Up 36	Your 23	Me 23
25	Her 12	As 5	Fresh 36	Use 22	Them 22
26	I 11	Reader 5	Know 34	Beautiful 21	Decision 20
27	One 11	Man 5	Better 31	So 20	Plan 14
28	Clear 11	Us 5	Friends 31	Mistakes 17	Friends 11
29	Difference 9	Difference 4	Plan 31	Full 17	Something 10
30	Possible 9	Argument 4	Great 29	Then 17	People 8

**Table 1.2 Top 30 Collocates of “Do” in Decreasing Order of Frequency**

Frequencies	BROWNTAG	LONCNESS	CLEC	MSSE	MSTM(RJ)
Tokens (percentage)	1/839	1/217	1/252	1/343	1/193
1	Not 363	Not 109	It 323	The 267	You 607
2	The 251	The 53	The 192	You 267	Think 259
3	A 115	To 40	You 174	I 219	The 236
4	In 82	Is 25	A 134	It 191	To 168
5	You 79	They 21	And 114	Homework 181	Not 157
6	And 67	Have 20	We 112	My 153	It 87
7	It 63	A 17	More 110	We 109	Know 79
8	With 62	In 16	Well 109	Some 106	A 69
9	This 57	That 15	Some 109	So 101	Have 60
10	Have 51	So 15	In 100	To 100	In 65
11	That 45	For 15	I 85	That 97	That 73

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12	Of	44	It	15	To	84	This	88	That	57
13	For	43	With	10	Thing	79	Work	60	This	56
14	Know	40	What	10	Better	77	Her	54	They	49
15	So	40	and	10	Things	65	They	54	He	46
16	He	39	Of	9	For	64	More	46	What	45
17	At	28	Their	8	Something	64	Of	44	Your	44
18	It	26	You	8	So	62	Best	42	About	39
19	We	26	Want	8	My	58	Exercise	40	Want	37
20	All	25	He	8	Work	58	Exercises	40	Is	34
21	About	25	As	7	Practice	52	Not	39	For	33
22	What	25	Take	7	Exercises	51	What	36	With	32
23	But	24	Believe	7	Of	48	Remember	36	Something	32
24	Is	24	Something	7	Best	47	Well	36	I	32
25	Well	23	Think	6	That	47	With	35	Need	29
26	I	23	Support	6	Lot	46	All	35	Exercises	29
27	Their	22	Anything	6	Many	36	After	34	So	24
28	As	21	Them	6	Know	34	Is	33	Agree	21
29	Better	21	But	6	Perfectly	32	Sports	32	Help	18
30	Want	20	By	6	Job	32			Remember	18

**Table 2.1 Main Collocates(noun) of De-lexical “Make” & “Do” in CLEC &MSSW AND MSTM**

<i>Make</i> used in CLEC &MSSW	<i>Do</i> used in CLEC&MSSW	<i>MAKE</i> used in MSTM	<i>DO</i> used in MSTM
Progress	Work	Films	Anything
Mistakes	Things	Jokes	Brainstorming
Friends	Homework	Beeline	Research
Plan	Everything	Bet	Quiz
Money	Something	Environment	Work
Commodities	Nothing	Brainstorming	Homework
Practice	anything	Bridge	Jobs
Laws	Exercises	Brochure	Nothing
Sentences	Reading	Call	Things
Living	Example	Mistakes	Project
Achievements	Experiment	Chapter	Exercises
Example	Practice	Chart	Writing
Success	Cooking	Circle	Favor
Conclusion	Teaching	List	Shopping
Everything	Deed	Collection	Revision
Decision	Progress	Page	Role-player
Clothes	Games	Comeback	Something
Job-hopping	Noise	Comment	Experiment
Something	Cook	Sentence	Interview
Production	Fish	Confusion	Study
Problems	Good citizen	Copy	Tasks
Knowledge	Doctor/ teacher	Tea	Damage
Condition	inventor	Decision	drawing
Profit	Job	Dialogue	
Model	Operation	Difference	
Improvement	Sports	Face	
Poem	offender	Fire	
List	chess	Friend	
Reform	lessons	Effort	
Face	movements	Advertisement	
Food	change	Talk	
Effort	walking	Poster	
Apology	listening	Living	
Policy	experiment	Money	
Statement	tasks	Reservation	
Impression	meal	Appointment	
Relationship	cleaning	Robot	

Preparation	writing	Meal	
Fortunate	speaking	Walk	
Beginning, influence	practice	Speech	
	physics	change	

**Table 2.2 Main Collocates(noun) of De-lexical “Make” & “Do” in BROWNTAG, LONCNESS**

<i>MAKE</i> from BROWNTAG	<i>MAKE</i> used in LONCNESS	<i>DO</i> USED IN BROWNTAG	<i>DO</i> (used in LONCNESS)
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Admission	Decision	Harm	Business
Programs	Mistake	Disadvantage	Anything
Plans	Choice	Division	One’s Right
Peace	Argument	Disservice	Evil
Law	Claim	Quickie	Murder
Decision	point	Footwork	Crime
Report	Statement	Chores	Battle
Adjustment	Error	Business	Something
Demands	Effort	Damage	Labor
Recommendation	Contribution	Will	Practice
Actions	Discovery	Anxiety	Jobs
Speech	Impact	Wrong	Favor
Assistance	Judgment	Penance	Things
Service	Advance	Chores	No good
Judgment	Appointment	Dirty)work	The
Contact	Attack	jobs	impossible
Comparison	Calculation	Dubious)	One’s best
Friends	Improvement	things	homework
Research	Observation	Hard) thinking	
Democracy	Reference	Duty	
Payment	Attempt	Trick	
preparation	Change	prisoners	
Commitment	Call	Repairs	
Calendar	Love	Uninteresting)	
Fire		routine	
Saws		Training	
Graphs		Shopping	
Soap		plowing	
Notes		Modernizing	
Paintings		Lawmaking	
Room		submitting	
Trouble		Composing	
Liars		Planning	
cutters		Running	
		Headstand	
		Kick-up	
		Pirouette	
		Thin-up	
		Push-up	